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CUBA'S DIFFICULTIES WITH
THE 1962 SUGAR HARVEST

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CUBA'S DIFFICULTIES WITH
THE 1962 SUGAR HARVEST

Cuba is expected to produce not more than 4.5 million metric tons of raw sugar in 1962 as a consequence of severe harvesting difficulties. This would be 25 percent lower than the average production of the last five years and would represent only two-thirds of the sugar produced during the first "People's Harvest" of last year. Many factors have combined to cause the expected reduction but the most significant is clearly the simple lack of capable cane harvesting manpower.

At the start of the current 1962 harvest the Cuban authorities estimated that production for the year would approximate 5.4 million metric tons. 1/ This figure represents a 10 percent decline from the average annual production of the previous five years and was apparently made in view of the following circumstances: rainfall in certain cane areas had been below normal during the 1961 growing season; little new cane had been planted in 1959 and 1960; cultivation of the cane had been neglected in 1959, 1960 and 1961; some cane land had been plowed up in order to diversify crop production; inexperienced volunteer cane cutters had damaged the perennial root stock in 1961; 2/ and in 1961 all standing cane had been cut, thereby eliminating the cane carry-over which has occurred in other years.

All of these factors have contributed to a reduction in the amount of cane standing in the fields, but as soon as the harvesting season began in January it became obvious that the most important factor limiting sugar production would not be the amount of cane in the fields but rather the amount of manpower willing and able to cut the cane and transport it to the mills.

Before the advent of the Castro regime the main factor determining the level of sugar production had been the amount that Cuba expected to sell abroad through the various sugar agreements. Often 20 to 30 percent of the standing cane was not cut. The main limiting factor last year, after the agreements had been destroyed, was the amount of cane standing in the fields and available for cutting.

The 1961 harvest was the first to be controlled by the Castro regime. Despite the draining away of manpower into the militia and into other sectors of the economy, Castro was able to bring in a bumper crop of 6.8 million metric tons of raw sugar in 1961 by calling for volunteer cane cutters to assist in the harvesting operations. The Cubans, undoubtedly encouraged by the expectation of better living conditions if a large crop were harvested and exported, responded to the call and gratuitously participated on weekends in the very exhausting work of harvesting cane.

The regular cutters were paid on the basis of an expected selling price of four cents per pound for all sugar produced up to four million tons. These four million tons were to be sent to the Sino-Soviet Bloc. All production above four million tons was to be paid for on the basis of the expected world market price of 2.5 cents per pound. 3/ Since the volunteers were working without pay and were helping to increase production and thereby decrease the wages of the regular cutters, some resentment was felt by the regular cutters. 4/

In spite of a reduction in the amount of cane available for harvesting, this year, Castro has again been forced to call for volunteers.

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The response so far this year has been far from gratifying. The current shortage of manpower in the cane fields results from a combination of circumstances. Demands on manpower continue to be made by the militia and by the attempts at industrialization and agricultural diversification. Experienced cane cutters, disappointed by the low wages of last year, have found other employment and are not volunteering their services in spite of government exhortations for all former cane cutters who are now engaged in other kinds of farm work to go to the cane fields at least on Sundays to help their old comrades with the sugar harvest. 5/ In spite of pleas and demands by the authorities, absenteeism by the regular cane cutters has become a significant problem. 6/ Further, the volunteers who are taking weeks off from their regular employment in order to work in the cane fields are continuing to draw their normal salaries. This has created dissatisfaction among the regular cutters who resent the fact that the pay received by the inefficient and less productive volunteers is greater than their own. Finally, the volunteers themselves are less willing to cooperate this year than they were last year since their efforts last year did not result in an improved standard of living and the prospects for an improved living standard in 1962 seem dim.

Cane cutting is exhausting, back-breaking work requiring substantial reserves of physical strength and endurance. In addition, efficient cane harvesting demands sufficient manpower to ensure that the cut cane is transported quickly from the fields to the grinding mills. The sugar content of the cut cane diminishes rapidly with time and to ensure maximum sugar recovery the cane must be ground at the mills immediately after cutting. 7/

Difficulties arising from the manpower shortage could be at least partly overcome by extending the harvesting into the rainy season which begins in May, but the sugar content in the cane reaches a maximum concentration during the last two weeks of March and the first two weeks of April. 8/ In addition, the rains seriously hamper the cutting and transporting operations. Therefore, although an extension of the harvesting season might permit the cutting of all the cane in the fields it would also result in reduced sugar recovery from the cane.

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